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PLEASE REPEAT TO THE EU COLLECTIVE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/11/2019
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [EAID](#) [EU](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: EUROPEAN ENVOYS VENT FRUSTRATION WITH TUNISIAN
GOVERNMENT

Classified by Ambassador Gordon Gray for reasons 1.4 (b) and
(d).

Summary

¶1. (C) During a December 9 lunch, 18 European ambassadors expressed frustration with the Tunisian government's tendency to view cooperation as a one-way street. "When we send them a check, they cash it right away, but when we request something via note verbale, it languishes for months," one Ambassador noted. Cooperation, whether in the exchange of information on security matters, or in GOT participation in regional workshops on various topics, is spotty and erratic, they lamented. The EU Ambassador noted Brussels was using regular talks within the framework of the Association Agreement to press for more openness from Tunis, but conceded there was little tangible to show for these efforts so far. The Europeans' comments underline that the USG's regular frustrations with the GOT are reflective of the Ben Ali government's overall wariness about engaging with foreigners.
End summary.

¶2. (U) The Ambassador hosted on December 9 a lunch for EU Ambassadors present in Tunis. Chiefs of Mission from Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, the EU, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Malta, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain, and the UK attended.

(Lack of) Intelligence Cooperation

¶3. (C) Spanish Ambassador Juan Martinez-Salazar observed that in spite of the "generic risk" of terror spread across the Maghreb region, Tunisia had largely steered clear of regional troubles and the government appeared to have a generally satisfactory grip on security. French Ambassador Pierre Manat lamented that Tunisia's intelligence services, at home and abroad, appeared far more preoccupied by the activities of political opponents than they were in identifying and disrupting terrorist groups.

¶4. (C) Despite the perception of a special relationship between France and Tunisia, intelligence cooperation was less than ideal, Manat observed. The most cooperation was with Tunisia's military intelligence organization, but this was the weakest and most marginal of intelligence agencies, Manat assessed. The 2008 kidnapping of two Austrian tourists on a desert safari in Tunisia's far south underlined the inability of the GOT ("or even a superpower") to completely secure the remote and virtually unpopulated "southern triangle," lunch attendees agreed.

GOT Reluctance to Engage

15. (C) Several EU Ambassadors noted that Tunisia is often absent from EU-sponsored conferences aimed at boosting regional cooperation in various technical fields. "Quite often, we have Algeria, Morocco, Libya, the European states, and Tunisia's seat is empty," one remarked. Romanian Ambassador Sorin Tanasescu expressed frustration that, in his experience, the GOT was reluctant to engage information on transnational criminal activities. This was particularly unfortunate, Tanasescu continued, as patterns and actors in transnational crime often overlap with transnational terror.

16. (C) German Ambassador Horst-Wolfram Kerll also lamented the Tunisians' reticence: "When we send them a check, they cash it right away, but when we request something via note verbale, it languishes for months." Noting that the U.S. has had similarly frustrating experiences in engaging with Tunisia, the Ambassador asked how the group could move from its common analysis to a common approach to convincing the GOT that its ambivalence about substantive cooperation is not in its best interest?

17. (C) EU Ambassador Adrianus Koetsenruijter responded that his mission was in a special position, meeting with various parts of the GOT on a regular basis within the framework of the EU-Tunisia Association Agreement. Apparently eager to follow the "Morocco model," the Tunisians were currently pressing the EU to be granted "advanced status" in its Association Agreement talks. Brussels has stressed to Tunisian interlocutors, Koetsenruijter continued, that the GOT should be working toward greater openness on various

fronts. At the same time, he continued, the EU's leverage is limited, as the Tunisians are already getting much of what they want from the status quo of their relationship with Europe, Koetsenruijter opined.

Cultural Programming

18. (C) Many of the Ambassadors at the lunch also expressed concern about a GOT decree issued in the summer of 2009 that requiring that performances or exhibitions in Tunisia by foreign artists be coordinated and approved by the Foreign Ministry. While all agreed that the publication of the decree boded ill for freedom of expression in Tunisia, many also noted assurances that the decree would not be applied to foreign embassies' cultural programming, and none could point to any adverse experience with the new rules so far.

Comment

19. (C) The observations of our European colleagues underlined for us the fact that the Ben Ali government's reticence and ambivalence toward international cooperation stems from the GOT's overall wariness and paranoia. End comment.

GRAY